Commercial Appeal

Jackson Reveals 'Profound Doubt' That Ray Was Killer Of Dr. King

PETROS, Tenn. (UPI) — Rev. Jesse Jackson, who was with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he was murdered 10 years ago, met James Earl Ray Thursday and said afterward that he had "profound doubt that he killed Dr. King."

And in another development, the warden of Brushy Mountain State Prison confirmed reports that Ray, who briefly escaped the facility here last summer, was apparently plotting an escape again this spring.

Ray, expected to testify next month before the House Assassinations Committee, has written Jackson, Ralph Abernathy and other civil rights leaders urging their help in his efforts to win a new trial for the April 4, 1968, slaying of King at Memphis. Both made it plain they support a new trial.

"I have profound doubt that he killed Dr. King," said Jackson after a two hour interview with Ray. "I am convinced that he was involved but was not alone.

"We have a moral obligation to go way beyond the realm of superficial investigation that has permeated this case," he said.

Jackson, who admitted to a "strong emotional urge" to see Ray, said he found the convicted killer was "rational" and had "excellent recall."

"It may very well be that Mr. Ray was a diversion in a grander scheme," said Jackson.

He said that Ray denied killing King and "said if he had to argue the case it would be in these four areas

"He had low motivation to kill Dr. King. Secondly, he would argue that he was at a service station and not at the flop house (from which the fatal bullet was fired). Thirdly, that his background in crime was for pay — not in violent crime but mainly in narcotics hustling.

"Last, he would say that the bullet taken from Dr. King was never proven to have come from that rifle (purchased by Ray). And he said the dumping of his belonging near the scene of the crime was an unreasonable way to escape."

Jackson was accompanied by the Rev. James Lawson of Los Angeles who was with Jackson and King in Memphis 10 years ago; Dr. Alvin Poussaint, a Harvard University psychiatry professor, and Ray's attorney, Mark Lane.

Poussaint said Ray "seemed a bit sober and a little bit sad. There was no evidence at all that he represented this raving person as described at times in the media."

He said Ray told them that at the time he pleaded guilty to the murder and was sentenced to 99 years in prison "after months of solitary confinement his thinking was not clear and he gave in more easily to persuasion, especially from his lawyers."

Abernathy, in an interview with The Commerical Appeal Thursday, also had said he believes Ray was aided by the FBI and Memphis police in his escape and that Ray's escape from a Missouri prison prior to the assassination was engineered by someone

Abernathy said he, too, is prepared to testify about his accusations Monday when he goes before the House Assassinations Committee.

Revs. James Lawson (Left), Jesse Jackson (Center)
With Harvard's Dr. Alvin Poussaint At Petros

"I'm not convinced he pulled the trigger," said Abernathy. "He may have been the trigger-puller. But I'm not convinced there weren't more people involved."

Brushy Mountain Prison Warden Stonney Lane, questioned about reports that Ray had plotted an escape earlier this year, said the Tennessee Bureau of Criminal Identification (TBI) had contacted him about a possible escape plot "three or four months ago."

"We checked it out and didn't notice anything out of the ordinary," said Lane. "There was no strange movement on Ray's part, none of his relatives came into the area, and it never developed into anything

"There was a report that someone, persons unknown, would drop a package on the mountain (behind the prison) for him to pick up (after an escape)," said Lane. "Supposedly, they even had the exact spot picked out."

NBC news reported that plans for the second escape attempt were intercepted by the House Assassinations Committee when Oliver Patterson, a congressional informant, stole letters from Ray to his brother, Jerry Ray.

Patterson found the letters, along with a map of the prison, in Jerry Ray's toilet kit while he was sharing a Washington hotel room with him.

NBC said Patterson pocketed the letters and map, left the hotel to go to another one across the street, photocopied what he had stolen and mailed copies to the committee.

The committee apparently turned the evidence over to the TBI.